

The Australian

Jayant Patel whistleblower 'treated like a leper' by Queensland Health

- by: Hedley Thomas
- From: The Australian
- December 16, 2011 12:00AM



Senior nurse Toni Hoffman at home yesterday. Picture: Jack Tran

Source: The Australian

THE senior nurse who put her career on the line to expose killer surgeon Jayant Patel in one of Australia's worst medical disasters revealed yesterday how Queensland Health and the Bligh government had treated her "like a leper" since she blew the whistle.

Toni Hoffman told The Australian that her career, health and psychiatric wellbeing were now severely affected because bureaucrats and successive ministers caused her to be increasingly shunned and ostracised in the six years since the debacle was exposed.

She said doctors who resented her for raising the alarm about a fellow clinician had undermined and ridiculed her.

Ms Hoffman, whose serious complaints about Dr Patel were largely ignored for two years by management at Bundaberg Hospital, issued a plea to Premier Anna Bligh to personally examine "the way I've been treated the past six years for trying to do the right thing for the patients". "I do not regret raising the concerns about Dr Patel because patients were dying, and I think about them all the time, but Queensland Health wants me to feel guilty -- they ostracise me, treat me like a leper and want me out," Ms Hoffman said yesterday.

"The truth is I haven't coped. I need support but my employer wants to punish me. But I'm not going to let them wreck my life and my career after I did the right thing. I'm not going away. But people need to know that the bureaucracy is just out of control. Its culture is sick."

Ms Hoffman's outspokenness comes at an acutely difficult time for Ms Bligh as she struggles to manage fallout from a new crisis in Queensland Health, following the alleged \$16 million embezzlement by Joel Morehu-Barlow, in the lead-up to a state election tipped for late February.

The head of a royal commission-style inquiry, former Supreme Court judge Geoff Davies QC, lauded Ms Hoffman as a hero in late 2005. He found her care, passion and courage were key in bringing to light a disaster, that led to at least 13 deaths and injuries to dozens of patients.

But Ms Hoffman, whose lawyers Maurice Blackburn this week launched a District Court action seeking \$500,000 in compensation, said she was now treated by Queensland Health and its corporate chiefs as "the untrustworthy nurse who embarrassed us all". Legal documents filed by Maurice Blackburn accuse Queensland Health of gross negligence in failing to care for Ms Hoffman over several years of extreme stress. The firm's Brisbane partner, Peter Koutsoukis, said: "The message she constantly gets is 'we do not want you in our organisation'. They have treated her abysmally even though she . . . saved lives."

Her solicitor Sugath Wijedoru said: "Their conduct shows a complete lack of respect and appreciation for the extraordinary things Toni Hoffman has done."

Ms Hoffman said she still suffered trauma over the deaths and injuries of patients despite her repeated attempts to force management to stop Patel from operating.

She said Queensland Health had compounded the damage in its treatment of her after a Google search had revealed Patel was a struck-off, grossly negligent surgeon in the US whose past had not been checked. Her employer rejected her repeated requests for specialised counselling.

Ms Hoffman, who received the Order of Australia medal and Local Hero recognition in 2006, said she was threatened with "performance management" and left in no doubt that her career was at a standstill or worse.
